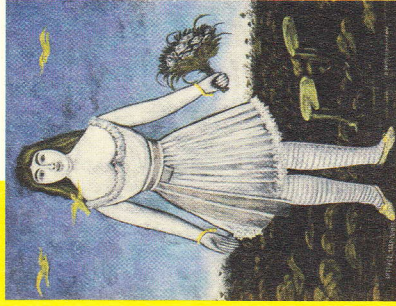




AUTODIDACTS FROM VAN GOGH TO PIROSMANI

Proceedings of the symposium conceived
by **Bice Curiger**



FONDAZIONE
VINCENT
VAN GOGH
ARLES

CIPRIAN ADRIAN BARSAN
MEHDI BELHAJ KACEM
MATHIS COLLINS
BICE CURIGER
PHILIPPE DAGEN
DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN
SUSANNE VON FALKENHAUSEN
GIORGI KHOSHITARIA
CHARLOTTE LAUBARD
WATO TSERETELI
NATSUKO UCHINO
RAPHAELA VOGEL
GILDA WILLIAMS

I'll open my presentation with a quote from Marilyn Strathern, which has been repeated by Donna Haraway, which is, "It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with".¹

I'm interested in the story we tell around outsider or self-taught artists, as this tends to follow a specific biographical/artistic pattern. I want first of all to examine that pattern, and then consider why it might hold special interest particularly in the popular imagination. What purpose does the "outsider/insider" divide serve?

I. I'll begin by tackling the question of definition, and what exactly we mean by "self-taught artist". Notoriously this is a problematic, if not unresolvable question—Dan Fox has talked about this very eloquently in his piece titled "The Amateur Hour",² which also points out how the prohibitive cost of arts education may be producing more formally "untrained" artists than ever. Some artists who are named "outsider" artists have actually had some art education—or even have a considerable education, like Paul Laffoley—and there are artists who never went to art school whom we would not put in that category, such as Francis Bacon. The terms "self-taught" or "autodidact" seem safer and less arbitrary than "outsider", but actually the whole set of terms—outsider, naïve, folk, visionary, art brut—are unstable and never airtight. We might be tempted to just get rid of all these inadequate terms and say, well, actually all artists are self-taught, or there is no inside/outside divide. Yet these terms are pointing to something real that needs naming—a placeholder for artists who work differently, or at least whose pathway into art-making and life/art practice or story follows another route, and who approach art from outside the art world of "museums, art magazine, fairs, commercial galleries", as Fox informally defines the "inside".

I'd like to point out that a lot of the examples in my paper will be American. The US has a particular history in this regard, not least but because of its history of slavery. Historically, many American so-called "outsiders" have been artists of colour, that is, people who were institutionally restricted, if not denied, access to schooling. Why are these artists kept "outside"? Who eventually "lets them in", and at what cost? Issues around class and race become absolutely essential in getting to grips with American "outsider" art, which is the term I'm mostly going to be using, over "self-taught". This is not an unproblematic chapter in art history.

Consider the biographical sketch *Man with Yoke* of African-American artist Bill Traylor, known for creating a very beautiful kind of painted drawing. His colours and drawing

1. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 12.

2. Dan Fox, "Amateur Hour", *frieze*, no. 178 (April 2016): <https://frieze.com/article/amateur-hour>.

GILDA WILLIAMS

Autodidacts on Autopilot

Familiar Narratives, Self-Taught Artists and Other Stories



David Hammons, *The Door* (*Admissions Office*), 1969. Wood, acrylic sheet and pigment construction, 200.7 x 121.9 x 38.1 cm, Collection of Friends, the Foundation of the California African American Museum. CAAM Foundation Purchase, with funds provided by the City of Los Angeles, Cultural Affairs Department. Courtesy of the California African American Museum, Los Angeles

quality are just exquisite. Traylor was born into slavery in the 1850s and, some eighty years later, homeless on the streets of Montgomery, Alabama, began making these silhouetted types of artworks on found scraps of board. In 1939, alongside others, Charles Shannon—a painter and a white, progressive-thinking (at least by the standards of the mid-century American South) artist—noticed Traylor and began supporting the work, buying basically all his artworks and even organizing a few exhibitions, which were financially unsuccessful. Alfred Barr famously took an interest in purchasing some works for the Museum of Modern Art, but offered so meagrely a price the deal fell through. Traylor died a pauper in 1949, and was only “rediscovered” in 1982 with the *Black Folk Art in America* exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC—all the surviving works having passed through Shannon’s hands. Some of Traylor’s descendants sued Shannon for possession of the art in the early 1990s, and an out-of-court settlement granted the family just twelve drawings. Traylor now is recognized as a major artistic talent, with a retrospective at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, for example. So the “inside” here seems to be privileged art world, the moneyed and connected art world, able to extract value—in different measures—from an artist coming from an unprivileged, isolated background.

There are other artists—not all African American—with not-dissimilar tales surrounding their life and work, artists like William Hawkins, Howard Finster, Lily Gibeon and Madge Gill. Usually their origins were fairly humble, and they found themselves in states of chronic isolation, whether social or geographic—or indeed both. Often their life stories involved a history of emotional and/or material deprivation, which often accounted for why they resorted to using whatever materials were at hand. They were cut off, sometimes institutionally, spending time in asylums or prison, for example. Their work is often “visionary”, in the sense of a kind of coherent inner vision, and they tend to be highly prolific. Outsider art is definitely associated with a voluminous output, and usually a very consistent body of work. They rarely have “periods” or varied experimentation, more like a single monolithic output. There’s really no such thing as an “emerging” outsider artist; the story usually entails someone who has worked for a very long time with a sense of self-perpetuating continuity and inner drive. The last chapter of the story tends to involve their “discovery” and validation by the art establishment, sometimes after death.

So this is a story we’ve all heard, with some variation. But this story prompts a lot of questions. First of all, I notice immediately that the figures usually introduced here, that is, historically marginalized identities—people of colour, people with non-normative sexualities, the mentally and the physically impaired, the poor—are the very same figures discussed in the decolonization of culture. If we are still talking about “self-taught” artists today—it’s fairly dated concept—we might look at the category

historically, and recognize that the invention of the outsider artist reflects the earliest rumblings around the realization that the voices of many people are chronically, institutionally ignored. The kinds of life stories behind outsider artists belong to social groups that have not been randomly excluded. So the “outsider” concerns Western art’s growing awareness—some might prefer the term “guilt”—of what it excludes from, as well as defines as, “art”. It is no coincidence that most of the best-known so-called outsider artists are from America and Europe and not elsewhere: outsiders can only exist with respect to a self-defined cultural “inside”.

II. In 1972 Roger Cardinal first defined “outsider art” for English-speaking readers of his eponymous book. Cardinal defined outsider art as an “artistic expression which thrives on its independence, shunning the public sphere and the art market”³.

What happens, for example, when an “outsider” gains a following, not just among critics and curators, but in the market? There are “superstar outsider artists”—Traylor among them—which turns somewhat oxymoronic. The familiar, outsider’s “story” turns confusing. Consider Albert Loudon, a British outsider artist who resents this term. He has shown in a Mayfair gallery, his works are fairly pricey. He’s actually done rather well for himself, so he is no longer, you know, barefoot and broke, but now able to make work using better materials. Is continuing to refer to him as an “outsider” just a put-down? An artist like Loudon ends up straddling between his outsider origins—which he might question in the first place—and an ongoing involvement with the art “centre”.

Or take an artist like Forrest Bess, whom you may know was an extraordinary abstract painter who lived out in the bayou in Texas, something of a hermit, a college drop-out who’d ran into trouble in the Army owing to his sexuality. He’d have probably been more comfortable in today’s climate of transgender acceptance, but that was not the case in 1950s America. He exhibited regularly with the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York, the very same established gallery as Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly. So Bess was an outsider in the sense that he lived in isolation in rural Texas, and had a non-normative way of life in many ways, however his art-making did not, actually, eschew the art history of his day nor the gallery system.

Another artist who briefly studied at an academy before quitting was Marcel Duchamp, whom no one would consider an “outsider” or thinks of him as an autodidact. Duchamp had a very bourgeois upbringing and was very much in contact with the “inside”, was a very informed artist and close friends with the notable artists of his day. Duchamp was at the forefront of artistic discourse, and of course revolutionized

3. Roger Cardinal, “Outsider Art and the Autistic Creator”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 364 (27 May 2009): p. 1459.

that discussion with the invention of the readymade. But, if we're strictly looking at figures who were self-taught or marginally taught by an art academy, we would have to include Duchamp, when in fact he belongs to a very different art-historical lineage. It seems Duchamp is an absolute art-historical "insider"—despite being semi-self-taught—not least but because his "story", in terms of class and biography, diverges considerably from the "outsider's story".

III. Just for fun, in the effort to define these affiliated terms, I'm going to loosely borrow a technique from the British artist Ryan Gander. Gander gives these fantastic lectures, and sometimes does this thing where he types in a word and asks Google Images to tell him what it looks like. If I type in a word and just what Google Images, what appears on the screen? So that's what I did: what does Google say "outsider art" looks like, or visionary art, or any of these categories?

This screenshot (opposite page) shows what the Google algorithms tell us "outsider art" looks like. So, there's a lot of colour, and flatness. I notice all the claustrophobic, tightly wound compositions. Next, with "folk art" we see this coloured-in very graphic imaging with heavy outline and solid colour forms, and a lot of very basic symbolism around the sun or the planets, and a stylized human figure. With "art brut", of course, Jean Dubuffet appears very often. The human face somehow comes to the fore in Google Image's "art brut" but again we have bright colour, flatness and very packed imagery. No part of the image or part of the artist's surface is left to its own devices—the whole page, or the whole canvas, is compulsively covered. "Naïve art", seems to venture into some landscapes and these sort of inventive, fantasy worlds.

So, that is what the algorithms tell us how these categories appear. Where it gets problematic is when I Google "insider art". "Insider art", as we're discussing it, should turn up—I don't know—maybe pictures of the Frieze Art Fair or a well-known gallery at Art Basel. The commercial, established art world is what, in practice, we may mean by "insider" art. Instead, when I Google "insider art" we get this rather heterogeneous picture: some fairly traditional-looking artworks; photographs of painters working in their studios; plus a website literally called insiderart.net, a site for female and non-binary comic book creators.

More interesting, I thought, was when I typed in the word "academic art". Here we see a pretty uniform notion of art-making: highly figurative paintings filled with shadow and contouring. We see hierarchical compositions rather than all-over patterns, but above all no flatness, the persistent illusion of depth. Does "outsider" art have to do with the absence of shadow? I thought getting to grips with this "shadow"—literally, and laterally—might be a lead in the attempt to define the undefinable, "outsider art".



Google Images "defines" outsider art and academic art.

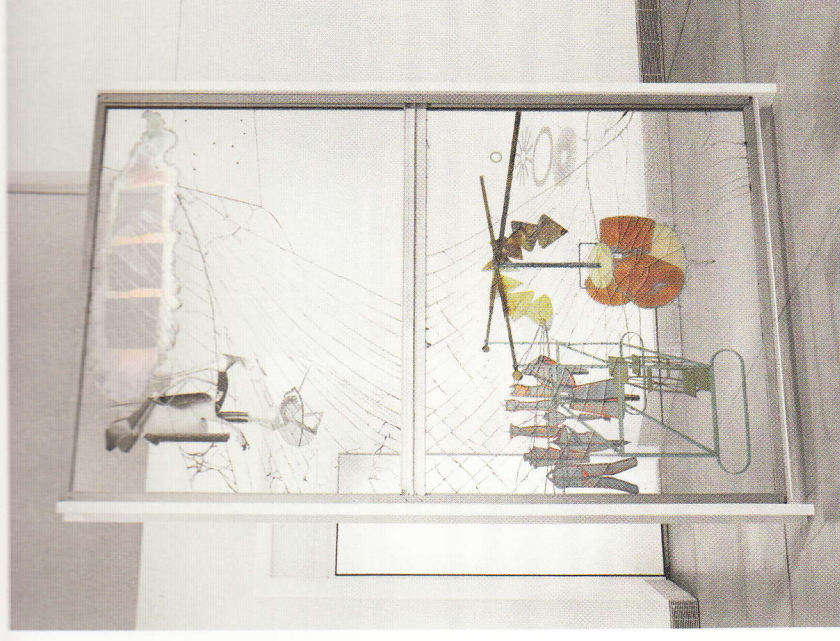
I thought about Duchamp, and the imaging of *Fountain* (1917). When Stieglitz photographed *Fountain* he really emphasized the shadow down the centre and below the work. In order to “artify” the readymade work, Stieglitz added drama, sculptural depth and “artistry” by accentuating shadow. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*), is also often photographed backlit and with tracery-like shadows, introducing foreground and background to what is, basically, a flat work, thus creating “depth”. The shadow and depth are introduced as the sort of marks of conventional artistry. Also, I think interestingly, Duchamp was very aware not to make too many readymades. To be a prolific readymade art-maker would somehow cancel out what he was doing and, in this context, perhaps associate him with practices of outsider art—not that I think Duchamp would have defined this decision that way. But he intuited that “fine art” is limited in output, and we’ve seen how “outsider” art is often marked by a voluminous output.

I’m not the first person to notice this point about shadows and outsider art, by the way. The subtitle of a documentary on Maud Lewis, the Canadian outsider painter, is “World without Shadows” for example.⁴ *The Shadow of the Avant-Garde* was the title of a 2015 show at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, which looked at conventionally accepted outsider artists, self-taught artists like Henri Rousseau as the “shadow” behind recognized artists from Paul Gauguin or Fernand Léger to Mike Kelley. The thesis was that these two allegedly separate artists’ groups in fact actively learned from each other and that many “insider” artists across the twentieth century were very aware and interested in what self-taught artists did—technically as well as visually and politically.

IV. I want to introduce here the valuable work of curator Lynne Cooke, who in 2018 curated a very important show called *Outliers and American Vanguard Art* for the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Hers was a deeply researched project, trying to get to grips with this tradition especially in America, and recognizing—as I mentioned earlier—that uncomfortable conversations around race, class and privilege are central to this history. Cooke does a very smart thing, I think, which is to re-think “outsider art” chronologically, and notice the ways in which the term has changed over time and accomplishes different kinds of cultural work—had different purposes and definitions over time.

Outliers and American Vanguard Art was divided into three periods. In the Modernist period, from around 1924 to 1943, there is a kind of interaction with

4. *Maud Lewis: A World Without Shadows*, dir. Diane Beaudry, 1976, 10 min.



Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*The Large Glass*), 1915–1923. Oil, varnish, lead foil, dust on two glass panels, 277.5 x 175.9 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Modernism, in which the outsider’s unacademic art-making seems to share much with certain avant-garde practices. Later, often state-sponsored endeavours during the Great Depression ventured into the “discovery”—that word again! Like Christopher Columbus’s alleged “discovery” of a long-settled continent!—of a vast economic underclass and its “outsider” life and culture. From about 1968 to the early 1990s “outsider” practices have often to do with Civil Rights, feminist movements, Stonewall. The push is for equality across society, and the recognition that there is an “outside” that is not visible, that is silenced. Mere “visibility” seemed to represent some cultural gain, although this somewhat passive strategy—which ultimately accepts its marginality—has been strongly questioned since then. From about 1993 to the present, Cooke situates a third period characterized by globalization and, of course, the digital and broad access to internet culture, all the open platforms afforded there. So Cooke observes how the “outsider” placeholder has performed different jobs over history.

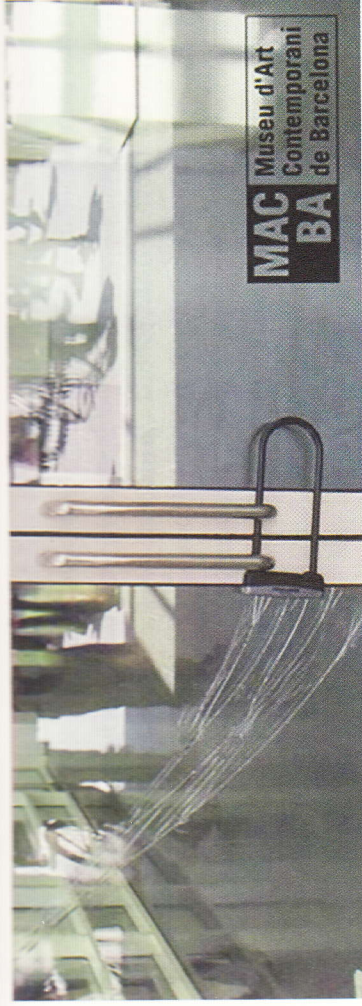
One thing I propose that we might consider here is, why can't we get rid of this notion of the "outsider"? What work is being done in this persistent, if changing, category? I think that the "outsider" raises really central questions that are rarely asked so directly in the art world. Vital, direct, almost embarrassingly basic questions like, why do people make art? What are we looking for when we look at—or look "for"—art? Plus, you know, who gets to sit at the captain's table? Who is the captain? Who gets invited? To what extent does social ritual determine artistic recognition—50 per cent? 100 per cent? How is class involved? What is the purpose of art school? All the toughest questions, really. What is the relationship between art and the labels we use to talk about it? Why do we perpetually need language to get a grip on art—what is the relationship between art and words?

With outsider art, we find ourselves returning to these tough questions that we can more or less safely avoid in the "inside" art world. Like, do we still believe in the "natural-born artistic genius", now considered an outdated notion but which the outsider artist's life-narrative often relies on? The outsider artist delivers that picture of the inspired, isolated genius—that kind of myth.

Leo Castelli, the gallerist of the most inside insider artists through the 1960s and 70s into the 1980s, when asked "what do you do for a living?", didn't say "I discover artists" or "I promote artists" or "I sell art". He said that he dealt "with myths from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day. ... My responsibility is the myth-making of myth material—which, handled properly and imaginatively, is the job of a dealer."⁵ For the market, the outsider artist arrives equipped with a readymade myth, a familiar discovery myth that hinges on innocence and credibility. Part of the outsider narrative is the economic shift of their art, from worthlessness to big-money hidden treasure—a story with much popular, mythical appeal.

But I'd like to return to shadows, and look a little more metaphorically at the idea of the shadow in art. The American artist and activist Gregory Sholette is the author of *Dark Matter* (2010). He talks about the dark matter of the art world—the art world's shadow—as the mass of artists who are art-educated but enjoy little or no recognition. Just as the universe is made up of 96 per cent of dark matter that we can't really see but know is there because of its interruptions, as Sholette puts it, so too the mass-MFA-educated art world is made up of a vast audience supporting a few recognized figures. These "outsiders", the art world's shadow, are in fact educated but nonetheless unable to access the few insider roles. Here too, the division between outsider/insider along the lines of education disappear. There are a lot of very educated

5. Leo Castelli (1966), quoted in Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. XII.



"Large Glass", cracked glass door at MACBA, 2001.

artists, artists who have invested a lot in their MFAs, who remain as "outsiders"—a "dark army", Sholette calls them.

Sholette brings in the example of an art group called Las Agencias, an informal collective of artists and activists in Barcelona.⁶ At the MACBA (Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art) in 2001, the Head of Public Programmes invited "outsider" groups to operate "inside" the museum. It was a disaster; there was a lot of criticism about, among other things, too many keys being distributed to people who didn't entirely belong "inside" the museum. The episode ended up in this a kind of stand-off with the police and protestors holed up in the café, which got destroyed. This idea of the "outsider" artists making their way en masse "inside" and threatening the centre was very literally played out in this particular art activism. The café's glass doors were shattered: we might say that the material result was another "large glass", if you will, smashed while maintaining inside/outside cultural divides.

V. I'd like to go back to the first coinage of the term "outsider art" with Roger Cardinal's important publication *Outsider Art* in 1972—a year which seems crucial in this history. *Outsider Art* was the first published recognition—at least in the United States—of this kind of art-making. Over time the term became not so much about being untutored, but—the word Cardinal employs—"unmonitored", artists just making the things they want, outside of art history and other expectations, outside official scrutiny.

The year 1972 is also the year that Harald Szeemann included his exhibition *Bilderei der Geisteskranken* (Artwork of the insane) in Documenta 5. Mental illness and institutionalization seems central within the European definition of the "outsider", I think more than in the US. Perhaps one of the differences between the American and European contexts is the history of the *Degenerate Art Exhibition* in 1937, the Nazi art

6. Gregory Sholette, "Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere", *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 3 (June 2004).

show, whose awful memory lingered for decades in Europe, and which presented the artwork of the insane (among others) as being “as crazy as” Modernism. Modern art was “insane” for Nazi cultural values; so, to recuperate the art of the insane in the post-war had a particular counter-fascist political and historical meaning in Europe that does not seem to resonate in the same way in the United States.

Also in 1972, the book *Learning from Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown was published, and that situated American vernacular architecture on similar terms: there’s something on the outside that academically trained architects overlook but ought to be looking at. It is also the year of the *Womanhouse* exhibition at CalArts, organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, focusing on women’s feminist practices. These artists are not only “outsiders” because they are women in a male art world, but because of their choice of materials and techniques, like crochet or quilting or macramé. Perhaps you know Julia Bryan-Wilson’s amazingly well-researched book *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (2018) where she argues that textile-based art has always been very conscious of its de-centred status, of having homemade origins, and being wilfully and politically outside “gallery” art: a kitchen-table art (if sometimes a studio practice) embedded in a how-to culture and the industry of DIY books—teach yourself to macramé or quilt, that sort of self-education. Textile art was always very conscious of being beyond the academy, of being “outside” standard art education and practice, and spread through non-institutionalized routes often based on an informal sharing of knowledge.

The following year Henry Darger died—Darger being, of course, the Chicago janitor who created over his lifetime the extraordinary world of the Vivian Girl wars and in some ways it is a “classic” model of the outsider artist. His work was only discovered upon his death, and he had nothing to do with the gallery art world—or most of society, actually. Like many outsider narratives, Darger’s centres on social exclusion; poverty; problematic sexual impulses seemingly detoured into art-making; a prolific output using cheap materials; compulsion; an extraordinary vision and not least, stunning draughtsmanship, collage and colouring—technical qualities which the market loves to draw value from.

Around that time, just as “outsider” art was being named, some very perceptive artists start playing with the expectations of “outsider” art. Betye Saar, for example, who’s a highly educated African-American female artist, started toying with what’s expected, with what iconography she’s expected to latch onto, and so delivered altered images of “Aunt Jemima” and so forth⁷. There’s a kind of faux naïve inversion that comes

7. In 1972 Saar created one of her best-known sculptural assemblages, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, based on the emblem of a pancake-mix brand first sold in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Recently the company has retired this problematic figure for its association with the “mammy” stereotype, a submissive female servant, connected with slavery and Southern racism.

into play, Kerry James Marshall is another very sophisticated painter who observes the expectations around vernacular art-making as regards flatness and colour, art that’s a kind of signage, re-working the conventional tropes of the outsider language.

The outside art world now seems often to emulate the inside or the established art world, institutionalizing this work with specialist magazines and dedicated associations like the European Outsider Art Association, or enterprises like the Outsider Art Fair. I don’t want to criticize this, but that emulation often repeats the limitations and deficiencies of the original model. For example, when Christie’s—which first held an “Outsider and Vernacular Art” auction in 2016—identified a “hot list” of the ten “top” outsider artists, there was alarming sense of déjà vu as far as gender was concerned: nine of these “top” outsiders are were men, and one was a woman. So no improvement there; no sense of “outsider” art moving beyond the familiar, skewed gender proportions

Both recent Documentas have brought in lesser-known self-taught artists. These included Korbini Aigner in Documenta 13, who bred and drew or watercoloured apples for most of his life, including his years imprisoned at Dachau, or the East German Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, whose work was shown in Documenta 14, who typewrote abstract images as a form of message-making aimed beyond the Berlin Wall. Again, outsider art can often answer very literally the question, “what is art for?” This art often serves a practical function, an “Arte Útil”: as therapy, as respite from unbearable circumstances, as a survival technique, as a witnessing, and as message-making, whether secular or divine (think Finster). Moreover, I think, these overlooked figures and practices suggest that our art history is a history of gaps and oversights. Moving forward, other histories will surely be seen as informing new art that may seem more pertinent than the familiar -isms and figures—the stories “inside” the conventional art-historical narrative—through which art history is now told.

Speaking of art history, 1972 of course was also the year of Beuys’ *Information Action*. This was a lecture-performance: education, as always, lay at the centre of his practice. His idea in some ways overturned the whole notion of insiders or outsiders, proposing instead that we potentially are all artists. I must say in my experience, Beuys doesn’t resonate at all with young artists, is not actually seen as especially “inclusive” or working beyond the art-historical frame. If I show my Goldsmiths students Joseph Beuys, they don’t identify at all; to them he’s just another patriarch. He’s not at all seen as a liberating and enabling figure but another top-down, conventional “insider”.

We might also here consider Tim Rollins and K.O.S. for example, who also ignored the idea of “inside” and “outside”, enabling and allowing for art education

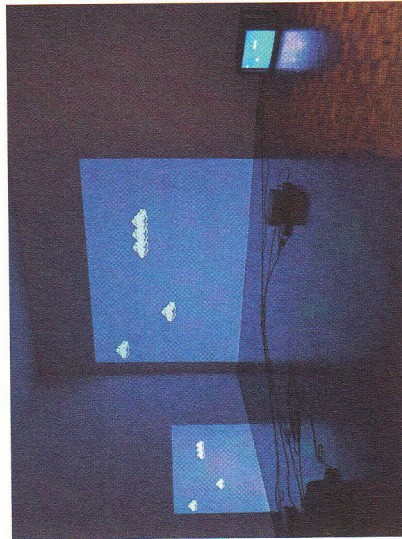
to reach people who may not necessarily have otherwise been art-educated. This again brings in the question of class and access, and perhaps another “large glass”: David Hammons’ *The Door (Admissions Office)* (1969) addresses very powerfully questions of restriction and access in education. Who gets “inside”, who does not? Does the institution open or close doors?

The year 1972 was also when a picture of the whole Earth was taken from space in an image widely reproduced—like aha! Finally we finally can see everything! Until people noticed, of course, that half the world was missing: the dark side of the planet, the shadow. This seems to be the same dynamic between “outside” and “inside”: certain practices are allowed “in”, and we may imagine we’re seeing everything, but so much remains missing—so many practices remain too radical, too unfamiliar to recognize.

I’m sure many of you saw the 2013 Venice Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, with “outsider works” such as Marino Auriti’s *Encyclopedic Palace of the World* from the 1950s, which was meant to hold all the knowledge of the world. Auriti’s ambition was to create a building in which all knowledge would be available to everyone. Howard Finster was, curiously enough, working on a similar project, in which he’d gather all knowledge and objects. The “outsider/insider” question is often not so much about education but access: to knowledge, recognition, parity, economic reward and more.

So: is the internet this totally accessible knowledge source, eliminating “outside” and “inside”? I think of how much of the internet is devoted to learning—WikiHow and YouTube tutorials—and people’s thirst to learn, as well as to teach.

Here is a work by a very well-known contemporary artist, and this kind of big-screen computer art is, I’m guessing, more or less what you would expect digital art to look like. You probably would not think of this as “outsider” art but as sophisticated



Cory Arcangel, *Super Mario Clouds*, 2002.
Handmade hacked *Super Mario Bros.*
cartridge and Nintendo NES video-game
system, dimensions variable, Whitney
Museum of American Art, New York.
Courtesy of the artist

digitally based and technologically advanced, gallery-friendly art. In fact, the artist is Cory Arcangel, a well-known digital artist, but he’s actually completely self-taught, as far as a formal art education is concerned—he actually studied music. So distinctions now start to really blur ... is the internet everybody’s teacher? Are we all increasingly self-taught, or partially self-taught? But marginalization and exclusion—the “outside”—persist, and even grow, as we all know. The dividing line just shifts and reorients, never gets erased.

If we were considering a revisionist art history, histories of the twentieth century that resonate with current art and young artists, crossing “inside” and “outside” and back again in a really inspiring way, I might in this context put forward Noah Purifoy. His story starts like that of many American outsider artists. He was born in 1917, the son of sharecroppers, in Alabama. The familiar story diverges when he very courageously gets himself an education—he’s the first-ever full-time African-American student to attend CalArts (at the time called the Chouinard Art Institute), so I mean, if anyone knows how it feels to be “an outsider”, in the first person, it’s got to be Noah Purifoy. Eventually, after being embraced by the art world he abandons that, apparently tires of that kind of gallery life, and ends up working with kids at the Watts Towers Art Centre, which he cofounded, as well as with prison art programmes. And then, as many know, he chooses in 1989 to move to Joshua Tree, the California desert, and make his own art there in considerable isolation, living and working in a sense like a conventional outsider artist, outside the usual art channels. He ends up a kind of “outsider artist elect”. And, we might say, he there picks up the “outsider story”, the outsider pattern—he is very prolific, and works with local, “found” materials (which actually he sources very carefully, I should point out). So Purifoy by the end of his life chooses for himself elements of the outsider story or pattern, writing his own story and moving across outside/inside lines as a way to achieve on his own terms personal and artistic freedom.